

Labor Pains

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If you're going to run from the law -- it doesn't much matter *whose* law -- I recommend Ralltiir. There, you never have to worry about where your next credit's coming from. Long before those Mandalorian guys started hassling the Republic, Ralltiir was the place where people came to make *bad* purchasing decisions. The blaster with the reversible handle came from Ralltiir. The sing-along hologram craze started on Ralltiir. I rest my case.

Thanks to the bucketheads, though, the planet was acting even more Ralltiirish than normal when I showed up. The helmet horde was still a long way off, but the sight of a Republic battlegroup forming in orbit had a lot of locals betting the other way, buying and selling as fast as they could. I don't blame 'em; Mandies just aren't as big on haggling as other tourists. The typical Mandalorian shopping spree, based on my limited experience, plays out about like this:

Seller: "Welcome, armored friend. Would you like to see something in a luxury landspeeder?"

Mandalorian: "Copaani mirshmure'cye, vod? I free this merchandise for the Mando'ade!"

Seller: "Ouch. You are harming me. I say again, ouch."

Mandalorian: "You are a cowardly people, and this driver's seat does not recline enough."

Seller: "Pain. Pain and ouch."

Mandalorian: (drives off)



So Ralltiir was in a mood to deal, on anything and everything. Now, normally, The Gryph -- that's me -- likes a good "Last Chance Sale." But, like I said, circumstances were requiring me to move fast to stay ahead of the authorities.

Now, a little of that is expected in my line of work. There was a study once that said 8.5% of all shipments delivered to Outer Rim spaceports never make it to their destinations. This time a year ago, I was the "point-five" where I lived -- with plans to become the "eight." Back then, a little notoriety was good for business -- and it helped that most species can't tell Snivvians apart, anyway. (If I thought it was bad when Mom couldn't tell my brother and me apart, it was only because I hadn't ventured offworld yet.)

Lately, however, I'd been traveling though space in an old junk-hauler with a couple of Arkanian Offshoots, including an old coot of an inventor who left his good sense in his other pants. And then there was my bodyguard of the hour, a human kid expelled from Jedi School and who was wanted on an impressive variety of charges, himself. The thing about Zayne Carrick --

-- but more about him later. Point is, we needed to travel as light as possible, and that made me a seller. Which, again, was not a problem, because Ralltiir was suddenly lousy with refugees fleeing inward from the conquered worlds, selling whatever they had on them to pay the way. There were plenty of locals with their credits out...

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...like *these* guys. I won't tell you how I found out about the Obohn Gallery of the Industrial Aesthetic -- protect the sources, y'know -- but I will say the curators were the *weirdest* couple of people I'd seen since breakfast. Dremullar Obohn di Garthos (ain't that a mouthful?) was the Muun, and he was Muun-ier than most. Nearly twice my height with his non-existent nose stuck high in the air, he sort of drifted amid the metal statues of the gallery like he was one of them.

I don't think he ever would have made eye contact with me if not for the *other* guy, a fat Rodian in a hoverchair. He must have been older than -- well, there's never *been* anyone that old. You know those ancient cultures they always talk about, forging the galaxy and whatever? This Rodian was probably sitting in his chair then, bumping into things and saying, "Hey, guys, nice work on that star system. I mean, real nice."

Only they wouldn't have understood him, because I don't think *anyone* could have understood him. He only let out whispered squawks, and then only to the big Muun guy, who kept leaning over to tend to him like a beloved plant. The Rodian would gabble, and his scaly green jowls would shake. And Master Obohn (that's what he wanted to be called) would listen, and smile, and a little color would come into his face -- taking it from white to off-white. And eventually, his haughtiness turned to me.

"Father says you are here to sell some statuary."

"Pardon?"

"Statuary. Works of mechanical art, like those you see around you."

"I got that part," I said, looking around. "You mentioned your father."

"*This is Father*," the Muun said, gesturing to the Rodian, as if I should have known.

"*Your father?*"

"Father."

"Whatever." It just doesn't pay to find out too much about the mark as a person. Half the time you start to like them, and that makes them harder to con. The other half of the time, you just start to get confused. This fell within the other half. "I've just come from Taris," I said, getting on with it. "I've got some stuff that'll interest you."

"I highly doubt that," Obohn sniffed, which is the only word for it despite the fact that I had 100% of the nose in the conversation. "Taris is under siege by the Mandalorians."

That's exactly it, I said, beginning my play. "There are a lot of Tarisians in the the industrial sculpture scene, just like you." Obohn seemed to puzzle a moment at this, the concept of anyone being *just like him* understandably foreign. "A lot of good artists have been uprooted. You've heard of Adnah Tiblarett?"

"Tiblarett?"

"Tiblarett." I saw it on a door once in the Upper City.

"Never heard of her." Obohn clapped -- and two Wookiees quietly appeared from the back.

I don't know what caught me more off guard: Wookiees doing anything quietly, or the fact they were both dressed in vests, waistcoats, and pants. I realized I had come to the right place, as anyone rich enough to make Wookiees play dress-up is certainly worth my time. "A moment, master!" I said. "Sorry -- blast my poor Cadomai accent! I didn't mean Tiblarett. I meant... *uhhh*..."

"Teronto?"

"No."

"T'gronish?"

"No..."

"Not *Tikartine*?"

"Is she any good?"

"He."

"Is *he* any good?"

"*Any good?*" Obohn clutched at the sleeves of his robe. "I should say so! If you have work by *Ineas Tikartine*..."

"That's the one, then." *Eel in the snare*. "I've got Tikartines by the shipload." Obohn waved off the Wooks and turned back to Dad for another summit meeting -- longer, this time.

The good thing with fencing artwork is it's usually a one-customer kind of deal. It's not a bunch of transactions, which raises your overhead like crazy. Leave that to the swoop gang newbies, hustling ryll a tube at a time. If they weren't wasting their own product on themselves, they'd still be in the hole for not counting their own labor costs. (I'll tell you, a good accountant and the Black Vulkars could start selling shares on the Coruscant Exchange.)

But I do digress: Obohn and his Ro-daddy were definitely interested. I thought the Rodian would rock off his chair -- and Obohn couldn't wait to prove to me he knew more than I did about Ineas what's-his-face. Which was fine by me, as I filled in the blanks. Yes, the poor, sad, reclusive sculptor was hard at work in his studio when the dastardly Mandalorians, whose idea of art is a sticker on a shoulder-pad, interrupted his genius. Only a lucky few escaped Taris -- including me and my junior associate, representatives bearing a few choice works to sell in order to raise money. With Obohn's help, Tikartine and his thirteen children might one day escape Taris -- to a place where, hopefully, he might continue to reshape hunks of shrapnel into works that captured the soaring spirit of an age.

Narrative established. Introduce product.

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A muffled thud resounded from the entrance to the gallery, followed by a less muffled and very un-Jedi-like epithet. (I suppose it would have been easier to introduce the product if I had left the doors open.) The Wookiees stepped forward to admit "my junior associate," pushing in two hovercarts piled high with the goods: agglomerations of gadgets and spare parts soldered together, some a couple of meters high.

Zayne deactivated the carts and slumped against the doorway, gasping as he flicked the sweat from his sandy hair. "You... didn't tell me ... about the *hill*."



I haven't had many henchmen in my time; one way or another, I've always tended to work alone. But there are times where a droid won't do as back-up, and when Zayne suddenly found himself out on the streets as a result of some unpleasantness, I saw a chance to expand my franchise. The kid was accused of something he didn't do -- and since I was caught up in it, too, I figured it would be interesting to see what a Knight (or an almost-one, like Zayne) could do on the grift. I'm like that: A lot of my colleagues hate the whole idea of Jedi Knights, seeing them as police that don't play fair. I see a profitable addition to the game. The power to influence the minds of the dim -- that's not far off *my* line.

So far, it was proving to be a mixed bag. Zayne wasn't exactly at the top of his Jedi class -- actually, if there was somebody worse, they probably sent him out for take-out and he never came back. Around me, his main knack seemed to be running into trouble. And everything was also turning into a negotiation.

Like with the hover-pallets. "I expected you ten minutes ago," I said. This was all I'd asked him to do. We've got a loader droid, but he's not much help. (That's another story.)

"Sorry," he said, gesturing toward the masses of bolted-together bric-a-brac. "There was a hill. And you said I should wait until *Camper* left the workshop."

Camper was the aforementioned Crazy Arkanian Offshoot, whose ship and mad-scientist lab *The Last Resort* was. I could see how it might take a while to shake him: Camper sometimes got caught up contemplating a rivet and would forget to eat. I was about to comment to that effect when I realized Obohn wasn't staring at the product, but, rather, *us*.

"You are the associate, human?" he asked Zayne.

"Guilty."

"You look like -- what's his name?" Obohn said. "The boy accused of killing the *Taris Four*. Zayne Carrick." He looked at me. "And he has that accomplice -- a Snivvian, like *you*."

"Well, that couldn't be the case," I said, "because I'm *his* boss." I reached up to slap my hand on the kid's shoulder. (He's too *tall*.) "Young Wervis here has been helping me since I adopted him. I freed the lad from a life of slave labor in a factory, skinning borrats." Summon teardrop, one (1). "To tell you the truth, *I'm* like a father to *him*."

"Less is more, Gryph," Zayne mumbled.

"Hush, Wervis. I know it's a bad memory." Pathos sells. "Now, son, can you push the merchan-- I mean, the *masterworks* into the light?"

Under the skylight at the center of the gallery, the "Tikartine statuary" looked right at home. A little greasier than some of the other displays, maybe -- and ours had a few more blinking lights. But they certainly captivated Obohn and the Rodian, who circled the "machine art" and chattered back and forth to one another.

"What are these things you had me get, anyway?" Zayne whispered, looking at the larger metal mountain on the pallet.

"It appears to be a frammistat. Or a whingdoodle. Or perhaps a whatsis," I said. "They're scrap metal -- and when the money runs out, they're our next meal."

Before Zayne could ask anything else, Obohn turned back to us. "No," he said, "I'm not sure about these." Puttering up to his side, the Rodian squawked skeptically. (I think; probably any adverb would work.) Obohn declared for both of them that they wanted to wait until an authenticator arrived from Telerath. That was a few days out and too late for us.

Nonchalantly, I turned away. You know how those Verpine guys have the eyes on either side of their heads -- and you can never tell whether they're looking at you or your date? I went Verpine. One eye on the exit, the other on Zayne. "Kid," I whispered, "it's time for you to go into action."

Zayne bolted upright and drew his hand to the bulge in his jacket, defensively. "Not the *lightsaber*!"

"Spirits of Cadomai, *no*." Zayne has a thing against chopping innocent people into bits. I asked Obohn for a moment to confer with the kid and whisked him aside. "I need you to use your magic to convince these guys this junk is art!"

Zayne recoiled again. "I'm not sure I should--"

"What do *you* care?"

"I care about ripping people off."

"Well, so do I. It's settled."

"I mean, it *bothers* me to rip people off," he said.

"And it bothers *me* to hear you say that," I said. The Jedi ran him off -- and for this, he keeps to their way of doing things? Stunning. "Look, henchman, I don't mind you sitting in the corner of the cargo hold and doing your whole meditation thing. But when it's time to put on a show, you *leave* it in the cargo hold. Got it?"

He gave me the stare. I *hate* the stare.

"Come *onnnnn*," I said, tacking against the wind. "These guys are *ghouls*. They're trying to pick the bones of what's left of Taris for their own drawing rooms. They *deserve* to be scammed."

A pause. "I guess so."

He sighed. I sighed.

It's always like running two cons at once with this kid. I've got to scam the mark -- while at the same time doing it in such a way that it doesn't get on Junior Saber-Twirler's nerves. I'll tell you, it's barely worth it.

Zayne straightened the collar on his jacket and went into action. "Excuse me, Master Obohn," he said, stepping up to one of our piles of junk and addressing the taller of the pair. "But you don't *need* to call an authenticator."

"I don't need to call an authenticator?" Obohn responded.

"These *are* authentic Tikartine sculptures," Zayne said.

"These *are* authentic Tikartine sculptures?"

The tone of voice is what always gets me. I'm immune to the dazzle stuff, and still, I nearly believed him.

But Obohn didn't. "Why should I take the word of a *boy* -- and a borrat-skinner, to boot?" He called out a couple of names I didn't recognize; the well-dressed Wookiees, I guessed.

My eyes darted to Zayne, who shrugged. He'd said before it only works on the weak-minded -- and whatever else was wrong with Obohn, he felt strongly about his art. I looked again to the exit. Where were the Wookiees?

But we were all interrupted when the Rodian began pulling at Obohn's robe and clucking urgently. "What is it, Father?" Obohn asked -- followed by more squawks.

Getting the picture, Zayne knelt directly in front of the bloated, wrinkled Rodian. "He doesn't *need* to call an authenticator, does he?"

The Rodian quaked and quivered and gurgled another unintelligible response.

Obohn leaned in close. "What, Father? We don't *need* an authenticator?"

"These *are* authentic Tikartine sculptures," Zayne repeated.

"Gwawk gleep glorb snork snork!"

"Why, these *are* authentic Tikartine sculptures!" Obohn said, his face brightening to a high old shine as he stepped forward to shake my hand, violently. "I doubted you, but -- no detail escapes Father's eye!" (And no meal escapes his grasp, I thought. The Hutts should worry.) "They *are* authentic. We don't *need* an authenticator!" The Muun patted the shoulder of a surprised Zayne, still kneeling before the chattering Rodian. Zayne looked at me, a little bewildered. How could he influence somebody he couldn't *understand*?

I shrugged. Whatever happened, at least we had a good carnival act.

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I didn't let Zayne get too pleased with himself; we were about to talk money, that subject dearest to me and which no Jedi hoodoo can do much about. This is normally where I do pretty well on my own. But I'd had unexpected expenses on our last score, and knowing we'd need to get a new ship to replace *The Last Resort* set me off on the wrong foot. Most cons, I'll start at double what I want and feign the existence of another buyer. But I hadn't laid the groundwork for the ringer -- a big no-no. Speed kills deals.

And talking money evidently activated whatever ulcers Obohn had, because I saw his face twist and rumple until I could almost believe he and the Rodian were related. I had to climb down off the high price -- but as I did, I could tell it only fired up his doubts again. I hated for Zayne to see his Mastermind losing control of a scam like this, but I hoped it was educational. Undermine your price, undermine yourself.

"I'll tell you what I think," Obohn declared, robes feathering between the two hover-pallets as he struck a pose between them. "I think these sculptures are legitimate -- *but you two are not!*"

"Excuse me?"

"You two don't work for Tikartine. I don't think you know him at all," he said, producing a comlink from the folds of his sleeve. "You know, my brother-in-law is the constable of this planet. He might like a word with you."

Zayne began backing towards the door, but I stopped him. "Counterplay," I whispered. This is the mark trying to get us to abandon the goods. I wasn't going to live with a discount like that. "Oh, yeah?" I fired back at Obohn. "Well, I don't think your brother is really the constable of the planet!" So there.

"Father?" Obohn asked.

The old Rodian rumbled again, somehow activating a holoprojector on his chair. (Where do you get one of those?) A shimmering wedding party appeared before us -- a smiling Muun bride and her smiling Muun groom standing before *the entire smiling Ralltiiri police force*.

"Lovely bride," I gulped.

Obohn had only started to raise the comlink the half-kilometer to his face when an uninvited guest suddenly barged in.

I pause to note that this is something that seems to happen with Zayne, plenty, too. The last few weeks had been a sequence of sudden arrivals, big surprises, and stunning coincidences. It seems to be one of the Jedi gifts -- and if it is, all I can say is they should wrap it back up and return it to from whence it came, with no forwarding address. I'm a businessman -- I like to command a day like a ship of the line, using a calm, structured approach to everything. "Uninvited guests suddenly barging in" take that ship and give it mynocks and a reactor failure.

At least, this one certainly did: Camper, the afore-mentioned grizzled owner of *The Last Resort*. By no means as ancient as the Rodian, but ancient enough -- and he could have given the Muun a run in the pale-complexion contest. I dug up Camper years ago, buried in Junk Junction in the Lower City of Taris; he wasn't much for conversation (except with himself), but his gadgets had sometimes come in handy. Traveling with him aboard his flying trash compactor these last few weeks, I determined my view of him was overrated. He had two settings: puttering or sputtering.

"*Rodent!*" Guess which one he was in now. "Yeah, I found you," Camper yelled, charging into the gallery. "Sendin' the boy to do your thievin', that's just like you."

Zayne looked at me as Camper approached the hoverpallets. "Gryph, you -- you told me he'd okayed me taking this stuff from his workshop," the kid said, forgetting Obohn was there.

I didn't forget. "Quiet," I said, bringing him closer. "How was I supposed to know he'd miss anything?" You should see the workshop -- the cargo hold -- we're talking about. We hit an asteroid once. It straightened things up.

Whisker-to-whisker with me, Camper wasn't going to let it go. "He's a thief. He's always been a thief." And he didn't care who knew it -- which went without saying, because he was already bellowing it. "Well, you're gonna push these right back, you hear me?"

"Camper, we're in the middle of a sensitive negotiation here."

"You just negotiate your way back to the ship. I was workin' on those."

"Since when has anything you've built worked? And how is it you only manage to be sane at the wrong--"

"Enough!"

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That last hadn't come from me, Zayne, or Camper -- but rather Master Obohn, who'd apparently had just about exactly what he said. He called forth his dapper Wookiees. "Get them out of my gallery -- *all of them!*"

At this point, I realized the operation had begun to slip out of my control.

I also realized that, if ever anyone wanted to invade Kashyyyk, the proper strategy would be to tell everybody there that slacks were in style for that season. Because while I would normally never choose to be on the same planet with a couple of angry Wookiees, angry Wookiees in pants tend to lose a bit of their effectiveness as killing machines.

At least, I was able to dodge -- barely -- the one who came after me, which would have been impossible save for their tailor's generosity with the pleats. Hairball would get a good run at me and would suddenly pop his seams, slowing him down. The gallery's displays made for some good cover, at least at the start -- until they started knocking them over.

Zayne was handling himself pretty well, too, during this time. He was still cautious about tipping his hand at the Jedi thing -- the saber stayed tucked away, and while some of the statues kind of took on a mind of their own when his Wookiee got too close, I'm not sure it was obvious.

Camper pretty much didn't move during any of this; he just kept fiddling with one of his widgets on one of the hover-pallets. I didn't see this, but Zayne tells me at one point a Wookiee came too close to Camper, and he turned part of the gadget on. The result was one knocked-out rug on the floor, shocked silly by something in our fake statue.

I would have liked to have seen that -- or, better, seen him do it to the other Wookiee -- but at the time I was occupied with my screaming. My Wookiee had shed his threads once and for all, and was immodestly clawing at the tallish statue I was perched atop. He kept trying to climb it, and every time Zayne would come near him, he'd let go and the whole production would start rocking back and forth.

It wasn't my closest call of the month, but this spot in my memory wasn't going to get a lot of visits.

Fortunately, we heard it again: "*Enough!*" Saved by the Muun. Seeing parts of his collection in jeopardy (and other parts in pieces), Obohn called his Wookiee off. Reluctantly, the Wookiee released the statue -- and more reluctantly, I followed it to the ground with a horrific crash.

By the time Zayne collected me from the marble floor, Obohn was still surveying the damage. The Rodian, unscathed, was having a good cry, which also drew the Muun's attention. This gave Zayne and me a chance to push Camper towards the door -- and something that made the moment as painful for me as it was for the collectors.

I'd cut him in.

I did so with grace and resignation. "Listen, you addled freak! These guys are patent agents for a major multi-galactic conglomerate, and for some reason neither of us can understand, they are interested in your inventions. Let us make the sale, and we'll all be happy!"

Camper raised a furry eyebrow. "They'll pay me."

"They'll pay *us* -- finder's fee, here. But yes."

Camper chewed his tongue. "They're not Adascorp. Because I hate Adascorp."

"They're not."

"An' Vanjervalis ripped me off some years ago."

"Not them, either. Anybody else you won't work for?"

He puckered. "Lemme think, now. There's a few."

"Well, it's not them, either! Now get out of here so we can close the deal!" Together, Zayne and I forcibly shoved him out the door. For good measure, I watched him shamble down the hilly street that led out of town and back to *The Last Resort*.

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I don't know how much Obohn and the floating ventriloquist's puppet heard of our conference, but my heart sank as I saw they were approaching us, excitedly conferring, too. "This can't be good," Zayne whispered.

"You don't fool me," Obohn said, fingering his comlink with his bony fingers. "*I know who you really are!*"

Instinctively, Zayne reached for his jacket again. He's raised a good sweat in the chase, and was flustered. To be identified as the wanted Padawan now...

"I know who you really are -- and I know who *that* was," he said, cracking a smile that Muun shouldn't smile. "You *are* thieves -- and that man was *Ineas Tikartine!*"

"Come again?"

While Zayne and I looked at each other, Obohn paced around us. "That man you shoved out of here -- I heard part of what he said. Those are *his* works -- and you two stole them!"

I saw it: Again with the comlink -- and the brother-in-law, and the wedding guests. Here it comes.

But Obohn simply pocketed the comlink and walked away.

"So..."

"So you're not going to call the authorities?" Zayne asked, putting a finer point on it than I was planning to.

"Of course not," Obohn said, his expression softening. He motioned for the standing Wookiee, who repaired to a hallway and returned with a large case. Just from the heft, I could tell what was in it -- and how much. Local hard currency. Ralltiiri Colonials, flippable for Republic credits just about anywhere. And more importantly -- about twice as many as I'd originally asked for.

I was nearly out the door with said case when Zayne, as usual, looked into the face of good fortune and poked it in the eye.

"Let me get this straight," Zayne asked Obohn, befuddled. "When you thought we didn't really know the artist, you were going to have us arrested. But now that you think we've *stolen* them -- you're willing to pay *double*."

"Yes," Obohn said, matter-of-factly stroking the "sculptures" with newfound admiration. "But it's not just that they're stolen. They're stolen -- and *the artist knows they're missing*." The Rodian burred with excitement and evident agreement. "These pieces are *much* more desirable in our circles, now. Much, *much* more. *Much more*."

"That's what I thought," Zayne said. A groan, before slouching off.

It really is better not to ask.

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We didn't talk much as we headed down the hill. I kept stopping to recount the cash -- and, I'll admit it, to just *look* at it -- and Zayne would find a tree to lean against and mope. I know Jedi are big on law and order and all, but after all that's happened to the kid, I swear you'd expect him to come at the galaxy a little less wide-eyed. I see people that are greedy and shameless -- and I see opportunity. What does Zayne see? I haven't figured that out yet.

For whatever reason, he took some kind of consolation in insisting that Camper get some of the money, like I promised. I'll admit I thought about catching him in one of his addled moments and giving him a bag of empty food-paste tins. I'm sure I could have thought of something. But it had been a profitable day, and I could afford to be magnanimous. (I'd just find something to sell Graybeard, anyway, to get it all back.)

Which brings me back to the advice I was giving. If you're an operator like me and you're considering bringing a Jedi into the organization, compromises like that are just going to be part of the package. Paying people. Picking marks that deserve to be cheated. Rounding corners you'd rather cut. They're all part of the care and feeding of a Jedi henchman.

It can be a tough haul -- in my case, it already has been. But I've been playing a hunch all along that it'll be worth it. And who knows? Just maybe, I can bring him along to my way of thinking on a few scores -- and *make* a few scores, while we're at it.

Mixed-up kid, that Zayne. But I'll make something out of him yet!